

DIAMOND JUBILEE

THE WORKERS' CIRCLE FRIENDLY
SOCIETY

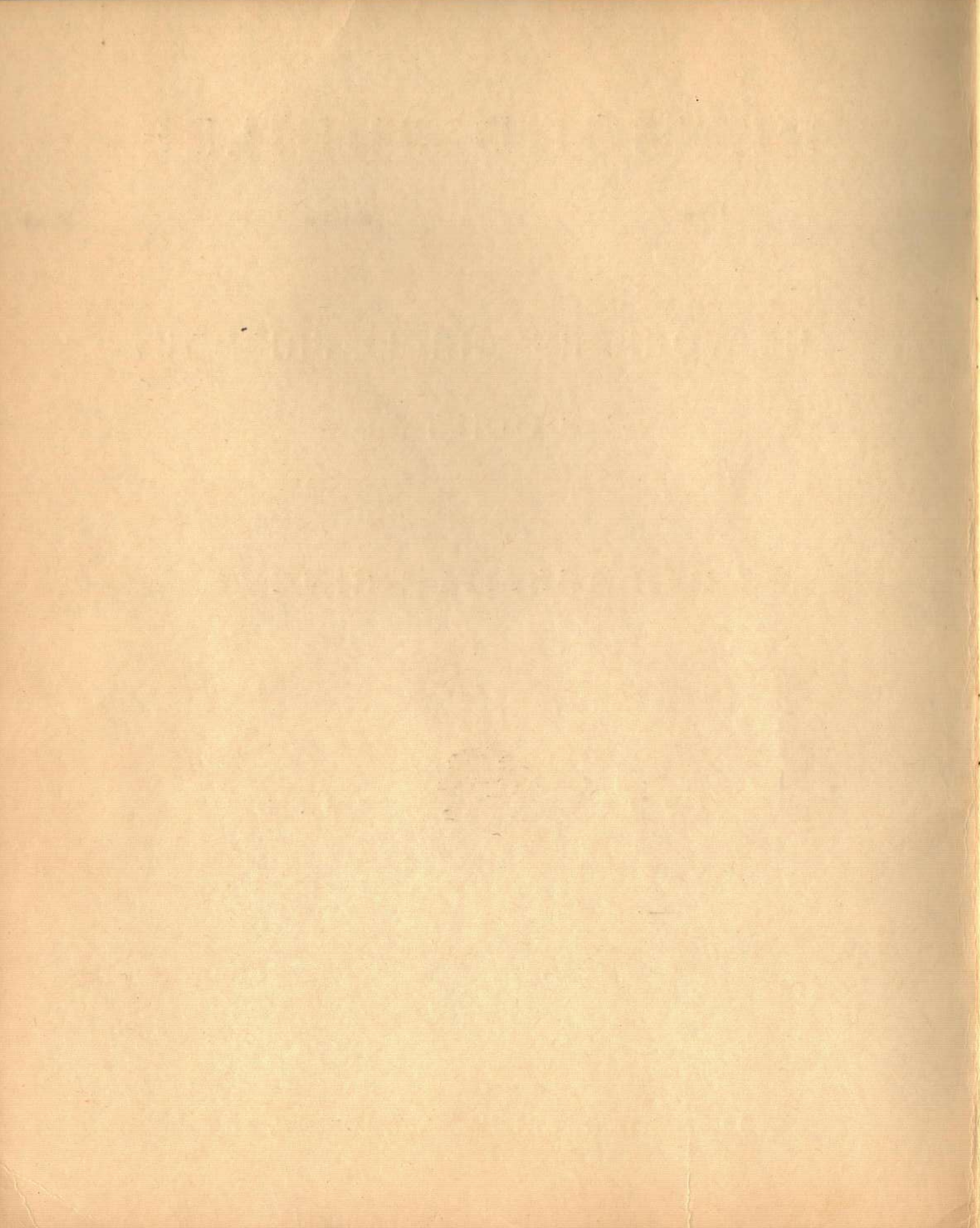
“DER ARBEITER RING”

1909



1969

13 SYLVESTER PATH, HACKNEY, LONDON, E.8.



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SIXTY YEARS OF THE WORKERS' CIRCLE FRIENDLY SOCIETY

THE BEGINNINGS — THE FOUNDERS' IDEALS

1908 to 1911

The Workers' Circle, as we know it today, is the result of the amalgamation of two tiny organisations in East London with similar names, ideals, and membership, and the subsequent establishment of Branches in London and the Provinces.

They were two small groups of young, socialist-minded Jewish immigrants from Tzarist Russia, who were motivated by a desire to combine for the purposes of self-education, literary work and self-help in times of sickness and unemployment. They looked to find likely followers among those progressive working-class Jews who did not fit in with the existing Jewish Friendly Societies, with their religious and petit-bourgeois bias.

The first group met initially in June 1908, in East London — the Arbeiter Ring Verein — with a membership of 12 led by W. Kramer, W. Kremer, and G. Portnoy. By 1910 when the membership had grown to 60, they came across a rival East London organisation advertising meetings, lectures etc. This was the Freie Arbeiter Ring, founded by 5 members on 17th July 1909, (also in E. London), led by N. Weiner and R. Hollander. The former was Gen. Sec of the Workers' Circle from 1909 - 1947, and the latter Treasurer and then Trustee for the same period.

In its first year this group had extended its influence and formed a Branch in Soho among the tailors living (and working) in the West End. After protracted negotiations begun in 1910, the Arbeiter Ring Verein, with 72 members, joined on July 1st, 1911 the Freie Arbeiter Ring as Branch 3, the West End Branch becoming Branch 2.

EXPANSION

On August 26th, 1911, Branch 4 was formed in N.E. London, and in the same year a Branch was established in Leeds (No. 5). In addition, the Zhitomir Co-op Society, a Landsmanshaft organisation in E. London, joined en bloc, as Branch 6.

1912

This year saw a further expansion with the formation of Div. No. 7 in Liverpool, Div. No. 8 in Glasgow, and Div. No. 11 in Manchester.

In London, two more Divisions were formed which only lasted for one year. They were No. 9 in Notting Hill, and No. 10 in E. London, the latter formed by a group of young Communists from Russia.

What had developed was a normal Friendly Society, not only with the usual benefits, but with extra features which were expanded as the years went by, bringing the Circle fame, and which still motivate the membership today.

From the outset, members were levied to purchase books, and this grew into a substantial library of Yiddish and Hebrew Classics, some of which are now in Israeli Universities.

Branch 3 started a school for young people, (mainly members' children), where Yiddish was taught against a Socialist and secular background.

Public lectures, with eminent speakers, e.g. Prof. Brodetzky, Leo Konig, Dr. Gaster, A. J. Cook (Mineworkers' Union Secretary), were held, sometimes as many as 25 or 30 a year.

In addition, the Branches of the Arbeiter Ring, both in London and the Provinces, were deeply involved with the lives and work of the surrounding Jewish workers. For instance, Division 8, in addition to starting the first Yiddish Library in Glasgow, led in setting up a Jewish Butchers' Co-operative to force meat prices down. All our Provincial Divisions were and still are represented on their respective Communal Councils.

Trade Unionism has always been part of the life of Circle members. All applicants for Circle membership were asked if they were Trade Union members. All through the existence of the Circle, leadership and assistance, both financial and in propaganda, were given when on strike or in other difficulties, to the tailors, bakers, cabinet-makers, cap-makers, furriers, shop assistants etc., many of them members of the Circle.

THE FIRST CONVENTION

1912

The 1st Convention was held in 1912, comprising delegates from all the Branches of the Ring. The function of the Conventions held from time to time was to lay down broad lines of policy, guiding the work of the Central Committee, which consisted of London Branch Delegates and proxy Delegates from the Provincial Branches. The Central Committee was further subdivided into Sub-Committees for day-to-day work, e.g. Management, Propaganda etc.

1913

Ideological, cultural and similar bonds have always been the basis for the formation of new Branches, and in 1913 a second Branch (No. 12) was formed in Leeds. Its activities fell under 3 main heads — Palestine, Socialist and Educational.

1914 to 1918

The effect of the Great War on the Ring's membership was disastrous. Including those in the British Armed Forces and those who went to Russia in 1917 to fight there under the Russo-British Convention of 1917, the loss was approximately 300, reducing membership from a total of 831 in 1914 to 511 (1918).

1915

REGISTRATION OF RULES

After a 5 year-long struggle with the Registrar of Friendly Societies, over the inclusion in its rules of "Educational Aims", the Rules were registered in Sept. 1915 with this aim omitted. Nevertheless, the ideas of the founders of the Workers' Circle have continued as the guiding lines for the membership throughout its existence so far — Education, lectures, library, concerts, drama, political involvement, communal and international participation.

All this in addition to the basic functions of a Registered Friendly Society:- Sickness and death benefits, convalescent benefit etc.

The Registration of the Society was followed in 1916 by its authority to administer the National Insurance Benefit scheme as it existed until the new act in 1948. The Society catered for non-members as well as members, and the financial assistance this gave to the Circle was quite substantial.

1916

In this year through the initiative of some Branch 2 members, a new Branch (14) was formed in Notting Hill (W. London) replacing the original Branch No. 9 which folded up in 1913 after a year's existence.

1917

This was a year of special significance for the Circle's members who had different ideas about the events surrounding the Revolution in Russia. One result was the formation of what is still Branch 9, founded by members with similar leanings.

1919

AFTER WORLD WAR 1

This year saw for the first time a Branch formed specifically for young English-speaking men and women, who were tied up with the Labour movement in E. London. They were recruited by two members of Div. 1., and became Div. 10, replacing the defunct Div. 10 of 1913.

The English influence has grown over the years, and today, in spite of the great devotion by the Circle and its members to Yiddish, its proceedings and publications are in English.

Membership of the Circle increased in this year to 725 and henceforth a yearly growth reaching 2551 in 1933, and more in the following years before the 1939/45 War (viz. 2964 - 1938).

The Manchester (Div. 11) Branch initiated the local Jewish Labour Council, which led later to the formation of the Council of Manchester & Salford Jews, celebrating in 1969 its Golden Jubilee

During the War Years, support had been given where needed to the families of serving soldiers or of men who had gone to Russia.

CIRCLE HOUSE

1920 to 1925

The growth in membership continued, and in 1920 Div. 13 was formed in Cardiff.

This period was of the greatest importance for the Circle which had been using rooms since 1912 at 136 Brick Lane, E.1. Its members led by B. Weinberg participated in a struggle with heroic devotion to raise money to buy and establish Circle House in Alie Street, London, E.1, in 1924. Circle House became a focal centre not only for Circle Members but for London as a whole, with its Committee rooms and refreshment bars open for all to meet in.

The house was a constant hive of activity and provided the complete social and cultural life of thousands of Jewish families, members and non-members alike.

Its Hall became nationally famous for its Sunday Concerts begun by A. L. Cohen, where for the price of a programme, one heard Ida Haendel make her debut, Albert Salmon play the violin, Solomon the piano, Laelia Finneberg and Mark Raphael sing, and many, many other famous International Artists. The Only other music to be heard on a Sunday evening in those days was at South Place, and Crowndale Working Men's College.

Circle House was also a refuge for the working men and women who were often on strike in E. London.

A unique feature of the Circle was the attendance once a week of a Solicitor to give free legal advice to our members. This Solicitor was Mr. A. Fine, LLB., son of a member, Mr. J. L. Fine, famous as Secretary of the Ladies Tailors' Union among working-class Jewry.

1920 to 1925

In 1922 Zionist influence in the Circle increased through the formation of Branch 15 (Poale Zion) in East London.

A Yiddish Schule was kept going from 1920 to 1923. Its revival on a larger and stronger basis after a Conference held in 1931 will be referred to later.

On the Cultural Scene, always the main aim of the idealistic Circle Founders, this post war period was one of great activity, led by M. Mindel and A. Salomon.

In 1920 the Propaganda Committee of the Circle published a monthly Journal. In 1923, even before the new Circle House was established, the Library was increased considerably.

They even tried to form a Workers' Circle Orchestra in 1925; and in the same year more than 25 public lectures of the highest order were arranged.

1926 to 1939

These years must again bring back memories of great industrial and political struggles, at home and on the international scene.

The Circle not only played its part, but on many occasions initiated important activities, and acted almost as the conscience of the Jewish workers in this country.

Three domestic events must be dealt with first. In 1927 the Society arranged for those of its members who wished, affiliation for Burial purposes with the West End Chesed V'Emeth Burial Society.

THE CONVALESCENT HOME

In 1928 activity started to establish a Workers' Circle Convalescent Home, and fund-raising led by I. Isenstone went on until 1932, and finally in 1933 Wilbury House in Littlehampton was opened. Except for the War years when it closed, the Convalescent Home has served as a place for recuperation and rest not only for Circle members but for the Community at large.

In 1931 the first Women's Section was started by Division 3. The Circle has always admitted women as members to the Society and wives of members have always helped the Circle in numerous ways voluntarily, but this was, and still is, a special group running its own affairs. Most Divisions since then had such Women's Sections, but the only other one still functioning in addition to that of Div. 3 is Division 10's Section.

1928

The events in the USSR especially in relation to its Jews were followed closely at the Circle, and when Biro-Bidjan was set up as an autonomous region for Soviet Jews, a propaganda and supporting organisation was set up in London called I.C.O.S., and this had a considerable following among Circle members. A. Gilbert was very active and acted as I.C.O.S. Hon. Secretary.

The many Zionist members were active regarding the fortunes of the Jews in Palestine, and in 1933, Div. 17 was formed with Left-Poale-Zion (B. Borochov) members. This Division no longer exists, but its Chairman, N. Baron, founded the British Section of the World Jewish Congress.

After the 1931 Conference, the responsibility for running the Yiddishe Schule was taken over by the Central Committee, and for years it flourished under such tutors as A. Holland, A. Waterman and I. Nathani.

1926 to 1939

FASCISM AND NAZISM

The rise of Fascism and Nazism for the last 6 years of this period involved the membership, now at its peak, in its greatest efforts.

Our members, in London and in the Provinces, were either initiators of activities, or in the forefront of united progressive action.

From 1933 - 1939 they participated in every possible action against Nazi Germany, and against the Fascist movement in England.

In 1934, the Central Committee, led by S. Joseph and L. Liff, and supported by the Provincial Divisions, were instrumental in the formation of the Jewish Labour Council, after initiating a Conference attended by representatives of 21 organisations. This organisation led in 1936 to the formation of the Jewish Peoples' Council against Fascism and Anti-Semitism, with J. Pearce as its Secretary, which carried on a massive propaganda campaign. Many will remember its influence among East London Jewry and their non Jewish allies on October 4th 1936, when the Fascists were prevented from marching through East London.

From 1936 - 1939 the Circle helped in every way the Aid for Spain Campaign, with collections of money and food. Circle members fought in Spain and some lost their lives in the fight against Fascism.

The Circle was linked too in its special support for the "Naftali-Botwin" Battalion of the International Brigade composed of Jews from Poland and other countries.

In 1937 a great effort was made to collect funds for the Gina Medern Sanatorium for tubercular Jewish children in Poland.

In the same year the Circle linked up with the National Council for Civil Liberties and with them and other organisations was represented in Paris at a Conference of the World Organisation against Anti-Semitism and Racism. Affiliations were also made with the World Jewish Congress.

Important too, in that the Circle which had always resisted any tie-up with the "Establishment" in Jewry, finally overcame its opposition, because of the over-whelming menace of Nazism.

In 1939, the members accepted a voluntary levy to support 19 orphaned Jewish child victims of Nazism brought to London from Vienna by the Jewish authorities.

THE SUNDAY CONCERTS

1926 to 1939

During this hectic period, in spite of Hitler, Franco, Mosley et al, the Sunday Concerts continued and flourished to win the Circle much gratitude from its audiences, and acquire a national reputation culturally. These concerts and the lectures continued until the outbreak of the War, as did a very exciting Drama Group under the auspices of Division 10.

1939 to 1945

The War years were disastrous for the Circle in every possible way. With nearly a third of its members in the Forces, the burden of activity fell in the remainder under difficult conditions. The House was bombed, the Hall destroyed, but the Circle carried on, with limited meetings.

Apart from contact with serving Circle members, the Circle participated in the Fund for Soviet Russia Campaign between 1941 - 1945, and sent Mobile X Ray Unit to the USSR, in addition to £2000 cash for the Fund, plus an additional £500 from Leeds Div. 5

In 1943, at the 11th Convention of the Workers' Circle, the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, which had taken place in April of that year, was commemorated. It has been commemorated every year since.

THE POST WAR PERIOD

1946 to 1956

The war had brought about a great dispersal of the membership with consequent loss of contact, which in many cases was not renewed after the war had ended. There was also a change over the years, accentuated in the Post War Period, in the economic position of some members, taking them away from the struggles of the Circle. This too added to the loss of membership.

The 1948 New Insurance Act (the Beveridge Scheme)) dealt the final blow from which the Circle, (and all similar Societies) has never recovered.

With compulsory Insurance contributions deducted at work, and benefits catered for by the State, the only ties that bound members were the ideological ones, (still very strong), the Convalescent Home and sheer loyalty. The decline in membership over the years, bringing our total in 1969 to under 1000, is the result of inability in the face of outside cultural and economic changes to recruit replacements for the natural diminution through death.

A (Youth) Division, No. 20 was formed at Circle House to try to bring new life into the Circle. Owing to the lack of a Hall and the poverty of amenities, combined with changes in post war social life generally, the Division did not last very long.

Some Divisions amalgamated to save administrative costs — Nos. 5 & 12 (Leeds) in 1946, and 4 & 10 (N. London) in 1950.

In spite of all this, activities took place on a scale far greater than commensurate with the size of the Circle's membership.

Contact was made and is still maintained with the U.J.R.E., (Jewish Resistance and Relief Organisation in France), help given to its work for Jewish children orphaned by the Nazis and support in general.

WARSAW GHETTO UPRISING MEMORIAL

In 1948, the Circle contributed towards the Holocaust Victims Memorial in Warsaw, and it was specially invited to send delegates to its unveiling. This invitation was made not only because of our contribution, but because of the Circle's long and firm association with Polish Jewry, in every aspect of their existence.

The report given on their return by our delegates S. Alexander and S. Lever, of the life of the Jews in Poland and the great hopes for their future, was reaffirmed fifteen years later by our delegates to Warsaw in 1963 at the 20th Anniversary of the Uprising.

Unfortunately, since the 1967 (6 day) Israel-Arab War the attitude of the Polish Government to the Jews in Poland has become so hostile that these hopes have been shattered. Today there is only a tiny remnant of Jewry still left owing to Anti-Semitic excesses and pressure forcing the rest to flee.

1948 of course also saw the establishment of the State of Israel, and the Society gave financial and moral support to the Histadruth during the troubled period.

The Convalescent Home was re-opened as soon as possible after the War and kept open all the year round until 1967, since when it has been closed in the winter. A great deal of money has been collected to subsidise the Home and also to modernise it by changing over from dormitory to smaller room accommodation.

CIRCLE HOUSE SOLD

After years of argument and disagreement within the Circle, it was finally decided not to rebuild, and Circle House was sold. The present smaller quarters in Hackney without a Hall, were purchased in 1956.

Before the departure from Alie Street, the Circle was dealt a severe blow by the Registrar of Friendly Societies who ordered the Society to disaffiliate from all political and similar organisations and to discontinue certain activities.

Affiliation to the Board of Deputies has been maintained, and any other activities have been paid for by special collections among members.

The twenty year period ending 1956 was one of great ideological and cultural activity, often with much internal dissension, but there was little will and less ability to prevent financial decline, let alone increase our resources. N. Weiner's scheme for changing the Benefit system came to nothing through wrangling, and our investments were in old Trustee stocks. Expenses have risen, and with a dwindling and ageing membership, the remainder have carried a heavy burden.

1957 to 1969

The pattern has continued since the move of Head Office to Hackney. Suburban and provincial Divisions have relinquished their own premises where they existed. In 1959 Div. 2 merged with Div 10, which had already taken in Div 4.

In spite of the foregoing gloomy picture, it must however be emphasised that a core of members, who are Central Committee delegates and serve on its Sub-Committees, and also Branch Committee Members have carried on in the tradition of the founders of the Circle, and served the Society loyally and diligently.

In the cultural field there has been a great change reflecting the change in the social habits of the community as much as the limitations of the Society. With an ageing and dispersed membership the Circle no longer provides the focal centre. The occasional lecture and social get-together is as much as can be expected.

NEW FASCIST MENACE — THE CIRCLE SHOWS THE WAY

On the wider field of political and communal activity, the Circle is always among the first to raise either the standard to rally the rest of the Jewish community, or among the first to protest on its behalf.

The recrudescence of neo-Nazi and fascist activity in 1960/61 shocked the Jewish Community, but it was the Circle, inspired by A. Waterman, that brought into being the Memorial Committee. Through this Committee, with solid support from the membership of the Circle, there has been held every year since 1960 a joint Meeting in London (and others in the provinces), representative of the whole Jewish Community, to commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto uprising.

The Circle took part until 1967 in pilgrimages organised by the Memorial Committee to the Commemorations in Warsaw, the largest being in 1963 for the 20th anniversary. It supported the Memorial Committee in its campaign against the Statute of Limitations introduced in Germany to stop further trials of War Criminals.

Since 1961 the Memorial Committee supported by the Circle has campaigned in the Jewish Community for the establishment of a Memorial in London to the memory of the 6 million victims of the Holocaust. This is coming into being. Although not anything like as important as we wanted, nevertheless there will be a part of Hillel House used by Jewish students in London, dedicated to the memory.

Close contacts, which have always existed, have been maintained with many Jewish communities abroad, and centres of Yiddish Culture, and the influence of the Circle in these spheres is much greater than would be expected from its size.

Domestically, much effort has been made to keep the Convalescent Home going, against great financial odds.

THE 6 DAY WAR — CAMPAIGN FOR ISRAEL

The Six Day War in 1967 brought the Circle into action immediately, and led by A. Holland, the membership contributed £2500 to the emergency J.P.A.

And finally, to celebrate the 60 years of the Circle's existence, and in fulfilment of its ideals, the members are commemorating the event by donating a Mobile Ambulance through Magen David Adom to Israel.

POSTSCRIPT BY THE WRITER

This History of the Workers' Circle Friendly Society has been condensed for reasons of economy, and much detail of the work of the Circle, both in London and in the Provinces has had to be omitted. Even the most outstanding events have had to be treated in the briefest possible manner.

In order to convey the fervour of the founding members, the assiduity of their associates, the dedication of the membership as a whole, (in spite of great struggles over principle and tactics), a large book of great merit would have been necessary.

The greatest difficulty has been to convey the impact and influence that such a small organisation had in these 60 years, particularly in the earlier years. This influence was such that often one meets people who believe their parents had been Circle members, when all that happened was that they had come within the orbit of the Circle's activities.

How to convey the opinion of the Circle held in Jewish communities abroad? The first port of call on many occasions by a visiting progressive Yiddish artist or literary figure from overseas, was the Circle. The list of such as these would be large, and we have no space.

In particular, the names of many members, living and dead, who have given yeoman service to the Circle, have been omitted, again for the sake of space.

All the writer can hope is that those who have had at any time some contact with the Circle, will fill in the omissions from their own experiences.

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